

Occupy Pittsburgh & the Challenges of Participatory Democracy

Jackie Smith & Bob Glidden
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Abstract

Local manifestations of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) have emerged around the world with enthusiasm for the participatory style used in Zuccotti Park (New York). However, less attention has been paid to earlier lessons about the limits of these techniques for building diverse and sustainable movements. Much of the discussion in the United States ignores how OWS is connected to the long-term and global struggle against corporate-led globalization. Also, models of consensus practiced in many OWS sites have become reified to the verge of fetishization. Activists in the U.S. have yet to effectively incorporate many lessons from global justice activism, including the need for a global analysis and strategy as well as greater sensitivity to how consensus practices can exclude people most harmed by the structures the movement opposes. This essay draws from our involvement in Occupy Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) and in the U.S. and World Social Forums (WSF) to compare the participatory democratic practices in each setting and identify lessons about organizing broad coalitions against capitalist globalization. Smith has participated in several World Social Forums and is on the National Planning Committee of the U.S. Social Forum. She and Glidden are co-facilitators of the outreach working group of Occupy Pittsburgh. Glidden participated in both U.S. Social Forums and in the Greens movement in the United States prior to his work in Occupy Pittsburgh.

Much of the discussion of Occupy Wall Street suffers from historical amnesia. Mainstream media reports and even internal OWS accounts have failed to identify connections to previous movements in the U.S. and worldwide. But as we shivered our way through several of Occupy Pittsburgh's long and often unproductive outdoor general assemblies (GAs) last fall, we were reminded of Francesca Polletta's 2002 book, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*. In this book, Polletta traces the ongoing development of participatory democracy through 20th century labor, civil rights, student, feminist, and economic justice movements. She analyzes how consensus techniques were developed and adapted through earlier struggles. Her account reveals that the consensus models used by OWS activists were adopted nearly verbatim from the Direct Action Network (DAN), which drew from the Greens and other movements' techniques to mobilize opposition to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and corporate globalization in the late 1990s.

Today, consensus techniques have captured the political imaginations of many who have lacked opportunities to engage in meaningful political deliberation. But many of the younger activists attracted to OWS would have been unlikely to seek out traditional movement organizations, which they have portrayed as stale, unsuccessful, and undemocratic in comparison to what was seen in Zuccotti Park. Proponents of this "new movement" often claim that--having been raised on the internet--they want to model the non-hierarchical, peer-to-peer structures of cyberspace where everybody appears to be equal. These democratic ambitions and generational

dynamics mirror those of earlier movements, and we hope that more attention to history can help us avoid mistakes of the past.

Tyranny of Structurelessness

Many OWS activists have been swayed by anarchist arguments which stress the tension between spontaneity and the formation of organizations. Consequently, there is resistance to having structure, in favor of fluid and supposedly open processes that are seen as more responsive to the democratic impulses of the group. But Polletta found that whether activists recognize it or not, particular relational structures inevitably shape group practices and affect activists' ability to realize participatory democracy. She shows that these often invisible structures were most damaging when movements sought to integrate new activists into their work. For instance, feminists developed tight-knit communities based on friendship and trust which fostered unity and commitment, but hindered the integration of new members and thwarted leadership initiatives. The U.S. New Left network called Students for a Democratic Society also found that the friendships that helped build local chapters often prevented newcomers from feeling welcome. More recently, the experiences of the DAN during the "Battle in Seattle" against the WTO revealed the limits of their particular consensus practices for creating spaces that were open and inclusive of people most harmed by the effects of the capitalist system DAN opposed. While consensus techniques helped build solidarity in small and relatively homogeneous groups, they were not effective in larger and more diverse organizations, especially without highly skilled facilitators.

American feminist Jo Freeman spoke in 1970 of the "tyranny of structurelessness" in which the absence of formal structures of accountability allows individuals or cliques to dominate. This has been evident since the early months of encampments at Occupy Pittsburgh and elsewhere, as those who maintained a continuous presence in camps claimed a higher status in group decision making. Activists who were not able to stay on site often revered those who did or at least were reluctant to challenge their preferences. Thus, decisions about the timing and location of general assemblies reflected the preferences of a minority of the participants who were able to spend large amounts of time in the camp. Over time, fewer activists from outside the camp attended these meetings despite remaining very active in other aspects of the movement. GAs were the only formal mechanism for collective decision-making, but they failed to reflect the views and interests of many active participants. As a result, the GAs in Pittsburgh repeatedly tabled or rejected proposals that would have increased movement building work.

The relational dynamics that emerged in Occupy Pittsburgh and elsewhere are based in the movement's origins as a physical occupation of public spaces. The backgrounds and experiences of activists involved on-site in the camp differed from those doing outreach and other movement work, and the camp consumed energy and focus that might have gone into expanding the movement. For some, preserving the experience of community and living out an alternative vision became an end in itself, generating an exclusionary group dynamic that made it difficult to build the movement. While many recognized this, it became impossible to challenge it openly, particularly as we were fighting a court battle against the camp's eviction. Had the movement been able to develop better methods for democratic deliberation and decision making, these tensions could have been avoided.

Fetishization of Consensus Models

Some Occupy activists in Pittsburgh have celebrated the duration of our general assembly as a paragon of participatory democracy. But Polletta's book argues that freedom is decidedly *not* an endless meeting. For activists staying at Occupy Pittsburgh's camp, endless GAs were a diversion from the doldrums of the camp, and since held near camp, didn't require a long, late-night return commute. But participation by other activists who had to travel to GAs after work or who had family and other obligations required more structure to the meetings—including a pre-announced agenda and a specific end time. Ironically, the least privileged of "the 99%" were most likely to be excluded from participating.

Another challenge was that Occupy Wall Street held frequent GAs—initially every day—and other "Occupies" adopted a similar structure. We learned that it was impossible to attend the general assemblies and still have time to do other activist work. This made learning about other working groups difficult, and we found ourselves scheduling additional coordination meetings for tasks that should have been accomplished in general assemblies. Those who frequented the GAs tended to be less involved in working groups, and therefore much of the work of Occupy Pittsburgh was left out of GA deliberations. In addition, the GAs often attracted new participants who occasionally created long debates about matters that had already been discussed. As the length of the meetings increased, many either capitulated or left, allowing decisions to be made by the hold-outs left standing at the end. Often, there was an imbalance which favored those speaking *against* proposals, and belligerent, stubborn and militant individuals tended to control conversation and decision-making. Noticeably few women participated in Pittsburgh's GAs after the first few weeks.

Polletta's study found additional limitations to consensus practices that we saw in our work with Occupy Pittsburgh. In particular, past experience shows that the attention and energy that is focused on consensus process can detract from the work of movement building. One way it does so is by complicating or slowing decision making in ways that make it difficult to respond to requests for support from potential allies or to plan actions with sufficient advance time. Another limitation is that a focus on group processes can reflect the avoidance of a larger discussion of goals and strategies. Our group spent a great deal of time attempting to build consensus among activists who did not share the same strategic orientations or goals, only to see decisions blocked in the end. Decisions that were made could not be enforced, and group statements became too generic and washed out. Persons in the majority ended up being excluded when they became tired of the intransigence of a minority.

Another key point is that consensus practices must also be seen as cultural artifacts. Like any cultural element, they can either attract or alienate people of diverse experiences and backgrounds. In Polletta's account, for instance, detractors of the "twinkling" and other consensus practices used by DAN (and now by OWS) activists to signal support or agreement derided it as "Californian," or "more concerned with self-liberation than with political change and more interested in how things 'feel' than in what they can accomplish" (Polletta 2002:198). In her widely circulated essay on the 1999 WTO protests, "Where was the Color in Seattle," Benita Martinez reported:

protesters of color ...talked about the "culture shock" they experienced when they first visited the ...protest center set up by the Direct Action Network.... "When we walked in, the room was filled with young whites calling themselves anarchists. There was a pungent smell, many had not showered. We just couldn't relate to the scene so our whole group left right away." Another told me, "They sounded dogmatic and paranoid." "I just

freaked and left," said another. "It wasn't just race, it was also culture, although race was key."

Cultural, educational and social disparities also mean that persons less familiar with the dominant practices or less confident or articulate are discouraged from participating in this type of large and open meeting.

Participatory democracy doesn't require consensus-based models, and indeed can incorporate various formulas for decisions by vote. Moreover, there are different forms that consensus processes can take, and activists need to be mindful of whom they seek to engage in the movement as well as whom they might be excluding when they adopt particular forms. The process of deliberation should help participants better understand the diversity of others' experiences and positions, and generate at least recognition of the legitimacy of others' arguments, if not agreement.

"Leaderlessness"

Another feature of the OWS movement that is often celebrated but not always understood is the absence of identified leaders. This is often mistaken as "leaderlessness," but we remind those using this term that we are a "*leader-full*" movement. Again, this feature of the movement is not unique to Occupiers, nor is it new. Feminist groups, among others, have long been conscious of the need to develop what they have referred to as *decentralized leadership*, both to nurture individual activists' skills in democratic participation and also to prevent the derailing of the movement through the repression or silencing of one or two key leaders. What is important to participatory democratic forms of decision-making then is that they help groups and their participants understand how power and authority works and enable them to recognize legitimate and illegitimate sources of authority. They can also help groups identify and recognize new forms and sources of leadership that respond to group needs while socializing and empowering new leaders (Polletta 2002:209).

Often the effort to celebrate equality and resist hierarchies ends up undercutting those with particular skills from contributing their leadership to the struggle. Acknowledging people's diverse abilities and recognizing their contributions is essential for sustaining individual participation, building movement power, and cultivating broader leadership skills. It is also important for more privileged activists especially to recognize that groups long marginalized by the larger society may support strong and visible leaders from among their ranks. We saw this in our work, and it appeared in Polletta's analysis of a low-income church-based organization. By identifying and acknowledging leadership while also constantly scrutinizing the operation of power within the movement, activists can help socialize other participants to learn from and support each other and to develop movement-relevant skills. George Friday, an organizer in the U.S. Social Forum, has referred to this as the "strategic use of privilege" (U.S. Social Forum 2012).

Lessons from the World Social Forums

Occupy Wall Street helped mobilize many new activists resisting inequality and corporate power. To sustain and expand the movement, however, OWS activists will need to build upon the lessons learned over many decades of struggle by earlier movements, most recently in the World Social Forum (WSF) process. The WSF began in 2001 as response to what activists saw as the limitation of the strategy of disrupting meetings of the global economic and

political elites. It has been a laboratory for activists to develop techniques of maximizing participation and inclusion across the huge diversity of a global movement. As an iterative gathering that generates extensive self-reflection, analysis and dialogue, the WSF contributes new understandings and values that can support participatory democracy and inform OWS activism. Like the WSFs, the OWS movement has emerged as a space to envision alternatives to our corporate-dominated economies. It is deliberate in its efforts to build collective power by nurturing broad and diverse coalitions.

Organizers in the World Social Forums have stressed the *global dimension of the problems* we all face and the need to *look for leadership from those most harmed by global capitalism* in order to develop an analysis of this global economic system that can inform strategy. Globalized capitalism affects people differently depending on their nationality as well as class and social positions. The movement cannot assess what it is up against until it has a better understanding of how the global system operates. In many places around the U.S., for instance, the least advantaged of “the 99%”—African Americans, immigrants, and other minority groups—were prevented from joining the Occupy struggle by, among other disadvantages, a long tradition of repression by what is known as the “prison industrial complex” (e.g., Martinez 2000). Thus, enhancing racial diversity in the movement requires attention beyond the financial sector to address the systemic use of violence that excludes particular communities from full participation in political and economic life. In the global context, the WSF’s privileging of leadership from the global South helps activists better understand how the North’s advantages are linked to systemic deprivations and violence elsewhere. As people in the U.S. work to defend public services we have come to expect, it is essential that we also resist the further exploitation of people in the global South.

Experience in the WSF has shown that activists must work consciously to improve movement practices in order to reverse the effects of inequality in our world. This has led to the principle of *intentionality*, which grew from United States Social Forum organizing and contributed to the wider WSF process. Intentionality means the deliberate emphasis on leadership from the most marginalized groups. It has meant that actions and events are cancelled, restructured, or postponed until such leadership can be developed. It has also led to the provision of solidarity funds and development of practices that help overcome the poverty and other obstacles that systematically exclude particular groups such as people of color, low-income, disabled, Indigenous, and lesbian, gay, queer and other gender non-conforming people (see Juris 2008; Karides et al 2010).

To create more equitable spaces for sharing experiences across national and other differences, the WSF has avoided becoming a political platform and instead stressed *relationships and active listening*, which tend to be neglected in conventional political campaigns that focus on external targets and timeframes. This same recognition, we believe, can be helpful to OWS activists. Many of the tensions we have seen in the OWS movement arise from differences in participants’ experiences and understandings. More conscious attention to the importance of building long-term relationships and mutual understanding will sustain and advance our collective struggle. And the WSF has shown that creating spaces for relationships does not prevent—and can even enhance—possibilities for collective action. A focus on relationships reveals how identities such as those based in class, race, gender, and nationality are produced by globalized capitalism. Thus, for WSF activists, any effort to transform this system must develop new kinds of identities and social relations. Spaces such as those created by the

WSF and newer movements can allow this to happen by bringing diverse groups together to challenge and transform dominant institutions and cultural practices.

One final observation is the ways the intentionality of the WSF has led to concrete ideas and models for advancing large-scale social transformation. Intentionality has helped Indigenous people share their perspectives and shape thinking about paths forward. In 2009, for instance, the World Social Forum in Belém highlighted the “Crisis of Civilization” exemplified by the 2008 financial crisis. Discussions were informed by ideas drawn from Indigenous cultures like the “rights of Mother Earth” and *buen vivir*— living well-- which provide alternatives to Western culture’s anthropocentrism and prioritization of economic growth. Also important for OWS activists is Indigenous traditions’ understanding of autonomy, for which they have struggled for over 500 years. Unlike many Western activists, and perhaps most notably many so-called anarchists, Indigenous cultures stress *collective autonomy* rather than the individualized autonomy demanded by many OWS activists. This emphasis on collective autonomy stresses individuals’ responsibilities and relationships to the larger group, whereas the ideas of autonomy held up by many of the most vocal OWS activists reflect the competitive individualism of the capitalist system we oppose.

In conclusion, we hope that the coming months bring discussion and reflection about the ways earlier struggles can inform the work of today’s struggles for global economic justice. In particular, there is a need to create more effective structures for collective decisionmaking and accountability. Occupy activists in the United States especially must consider the global dimensions of this struggle and strengthen transnational communication and solidarity. The movement can be strengthened by conscious attention to the cultural work of transforming identities, institutions and practices to advance struggles against patriarchy and all other hierarchies and exclusions. In the near term, however, we need to stress what Polletta calls the “ethic of care” to nurture the unity in diversity; the relationships we need to carry on what will be a long and hard struggle for a better world.

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Author Biographies

Jackie Smith is professor of sociology at the University of Pittsburgh and a representative to the National Planning Committee of the U.S. Social Forum. She serves on Occupy Pittsburgh’s outreach working group. She is author of *Social Movements for Global Democracy* and co-author of *Social Movements in the World-System* and *Global Democracy and the World Social Forums*.

Bob Glidden lives in Pittsburgh and serves on Occupy Pittsburgh’s outreach working group.